



FEATURES

Baltimore resident documents city's 'beautiful chaos,' creating archive of graffiti tags, signs and stickers

By Abigail Gruskin

Baltimore Sun • Published: Jul 24, 2023 at 6:00 am



 Expand



Patrick Swickard, a Mount Vernon resident, has taken more than 30,000 photos of impermanent additions to the city's streetscape. (Jennifer Gable/Baltimore Sun)

Discovering Baltimore's boldest graffiti, in spots like the aptly-named Graffiti Alley — a colorful pocket of Station North — took no time at all for Patrick Swickard, who moved from Milwaukee to Mount Vernon in 2012.

But it was the less impressive graffiti tags and graphic posters that cover Baltimore's sidewalks, walls and utility poles that really caught his eye.

"Here's this mundane thing that I see every day ... let's bring this up to the forefront," said Swickard, a 47-year-old software developer and engineer. "There's this beautiful chaos to it."

Over more than six years, Swickard captured some 30,000 photos of

those additions to Baltimore's streetscape — focusing on the markings that appear to have been made on a whim, the fliers left to succumb to the elements. He uploaded his collection onto [Flickr](#), created [his own website](#) and wrote code to produce a 50-volume series of books, in PDF form.

It's his way of preserving a fleeting form of communication — albeit one that is, in many instances, illegal.

"It's just overwhelming, how much graffiti you see ... It's Baltimore, it's '[The City That Reads](#),' and I thought that was really funny, because I'm walking around reading graffiti all the time," Swickard said.

Swickard ditched his car when he first moved to Mount Vernon, where he's lived since 2012. Instead, he's covered ground on foot.

"You're a software developer, you're in a chair a lot," said Swickard, who also worked for about five years as a taxi driver in Wisconsin. "I was trying to get up and take a lot more walks, get active."

By 2013, he was snapping casual photos on his Baltimore outings. When running errands, he'd bring along a pocket-sized Sony camera; sometimes, he'd set out specifically to document posters, tags and other markings, like a torn-up flier advertising French and Italian language tutoring, "AH!" spray-painted in blue and white onto pavement and stickers plastered on the backs of street signs.





Patrick Swickard holds two of the books he produced containing words and images of street graffiti, tags, posters and other temporary markings he has captured with a point-and-shoot camera. (Jennifer Gable/Baltimore Sun)

Swickard's not a professional photographer, but he was familiar with metadata, the information attached to photos that details where and when they were taken, by whom and what they depict.

A job working with metadata at a commercial stock and art photography company in Madison, Wisconsin forced him to think about how words and visuals could be interwoven.

"When he started working for me, I really cautioned him ... because [the project] kind of changed how you looked at things," said Sara Cotton, who hired Swickard. "And I remember Patrick calling me and telling me that he had walked into a bookstore [in Wisconsin], and all of a sudden, all these keywords were popping up for him" — almost like comic strip speech bubbles or captions describing the scene he was observing, she explained.

As Swickard chipped away at his own project, he sent Cotton photos of his Baltimore sightings via text, email and social media, she said.

"Photo archives are just [an] incredible wealth of knowledge," Cotton, 43, said, noting that in the case of Swickard's project, he's

telling "the story of living in Baltimore."

Some of Swickard's photos were included in an archive project documenting the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore. In other Flickr albums, the rise of e-scooters from companies like Bird is evident.

Swickard's photos are mostly devoid of people, though when he came across someone actively tagging a surface with spray paint, he'd explain that he had no intention of reporting their activity.

"I was always worried how they would be contextualized outside of my project," Swickard said of the images he created. "I really didn't want people using my photos to try to make Baltimore look bad."

In April, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott launched a 90-day cleanup initiative that included a goal of removing 900 graffiti tags.

According to its website, the Baltimore City Department of Public Works removes graffiti from city-owned and private residential properties, but not commercial properties or privately owned businesses. The department calls graffiti a "major problem" in Baltimore. DPW did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The act is categorized as a misdemeanor according to state law, with possible penalties based on the dollar amount of damage caused. Baltimore City Code deems it unlawful to "wilfully and maliciously destroy, injure, deface, molest, or spray or splash with paint, lacquer, or similar substance" public buildings and personal property.

But as Swickard walked the city, he noticed what he called "a weird logic" to where people graffiti, like on brick walls in alleys as opposed to homeowners' windows, which would be "unethical," he said.

Graffiti removal is a “necessary evil,” he added, to create more space for new designs.

Swickard’s photography slowed down around 2019, in part due to an injury that made walking difficult and because “working that intensely on something for that long is bound to burn you out,” he explained.

But he wasn’t finished with the project quite yet.

Swickard wrote his own code to produce PDF files that comprise his run of books, or “zines,” as he calls them. They’re 150 to 200 pages long, with two to four photos and captions per page in an 8.5-inch by 11-inch format.

Two index volumes — more than twice the length of the photo zines — contain all of the captions, arranged chronologically in one and alphabetically in the other.

Swickard has printed some of the books via Barnes & Noble Press, a self-publishing service, and sold two volumes to Bobbie Webb, who works at The Brewer’s Art in Mount Vernon.

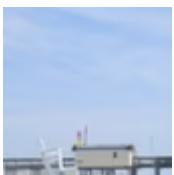
Swickard frequented the bar, Webb said, and eventually the two struck up a conversation about his project. When he brought in Volume 1 and Volume 27 of his photo books, Webb said she bought them for \$20 each.

“It’s really cool seeing what the city looked like before I was here,” said Webb, 21, who moved to Baltimore about two years ago after having lived in different parts of Maryland and West Virginia.

Baby’s On Fire, a coffee shop on the outskirts of Mount Vernon where Swickard also worked on his books, has a copy of Volume 50

on display, he said. Swickard doesn't have plans to sell his books more widely. (Another book about Baltimore graffiti by a different author, [featuring photos taken between 2011 and 2014](#), was published in 2016.)

But Webb said she believes that Swickard's books would also appeal to Baltimoreans.



Weekend Watch

Weekly

Plan your weekend with our picks for the best events, restaurant and movie reviews, TV shows and more. Delivered every Thursday.

By submitting your email to receive this newsletter, you agree to our [Subscriber Terms & Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

ENTER YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

>

"Graffiti, to me, is art," she said.

The illicit form of expression has inspired and been integrated into the more formal art world for a while now, according to Luis Rosenfeld, a street artist who owns Graffiti Warehouse, a studio and gathering space that backs up on Graffiti Alley in Station North.

Rosenfeld said he's seen graffiti-style artwork at the annual Art Basel show in Miami Beach, Florida and in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood, known for its murals. Works by street artist Banksy have sold for millions of dollars.

In Baltimore, Rosenfeld founded the nonprofit Rosenfeld Org to preserve Graffiti Alley.

"To have an outlet, like Graffiti Alley ... is wonderful, because at least the people that want to do graffiti have a place to go and do

graffiti, and not end up with a criminal record," Rosenfeld said, noting that an informal understanding was reached with city officials years ago.

There, graffiti is intentionally left on display, as artists take turns designing the walls. Spray painted phrases and sticker collages aren't treated with regard on other Baltimore streets — but they live on in Swickard's archives.

"It's so ephemeral, it would be gone if nobody documented it," he said. "I didn't want it to be lost."

2023 > July > 24

LATEST

NATION & WORLD

Israel's Netanyahu released from hospital ahead of key vote on legal overhaul

38m





NATION & WORLD

UN Command says it's communicating with North Korea about detained US soldier

40m



NATION & WORLD

Elon Musk reveals new black and white X logo to replace Twitter's blue bird

42m





CONNECT



TRIBUNE PUBLISHING

Chicago Tribune

Orlando Sentinel

The Morning Call of Pa.

Daily Press of Va.

Studio 1847

New York Daily News

Sun Sentinel of Fla.

Hartford Courant

The Virginian-Pilot

COMPANY INFO

About us

Help Center

Careers

Privacy Policy

Manage Web Notifications

Advertise With Us

California Notice at Collection

Do Not Sell/Share My Personal Information

About our ads

Contact us

Classifieds

Terms of Service

Archives Site Map

Notice of Financial Incentive

Cookie Policy

Cookie Preferences

Copyright © 2023, Baltimore Sun